

## CULTURAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY: INTERVIEW WITH JOHN KNIGHT

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**John M. Knight** has been an adjunct professor at St. Mary's College of California since 1980. He began his cross-cultural experiences as the son of a U.S. Air Force chaplain in Germany in the 1950s and continued them for four years as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Ethiopia. Afterward, John worked with the Papago Indians in Tucson, Arizona, while pursuing his masters' degree, and then spent six years teaching English in Saudi Arabia. Since he returned to the United States in 1979, in addition to teaching, he has conducted cross-cultural communication programs for Pacific Gas and Electric, Stauffer Chemical Company, Heublien Wines, Mitsubishi Bank and Glendale Adventist Medical Center. At St. Mary's College, Knight and a colleague developed the Cross-Cultural Communication course they teach during the January Terms. The final project for this class is a written family history exploring values spanning three generations of the students' families. To help students "think outside the box" Knight uses simulation exercises in his classes, including "Using Silence to Make a Point", which he developed and published in the 2002-2003 edition of *The Journal Of The Imagination In Language Learning And Teaching*, published by New Jersey City University. He is also the co-author of *Developing Intercultural Awareness*, a training manual for beginning cross-cultural trainers.

Professor Knight's personal and professional experiences enable us to ask uncountable questions about different issues. However, the following questions aim to present to the academic community his practice of autobiographical writing with focus on the cultural dimension.

**Amorim Neto:** Professor, during the last academic term I had the opportunity to learn more about your work in our class called "American Culture and Civilization." One of the main activities of this course is the Cultural Autobiography. What exactly is a Cultural Autobiography?

**John Knight:** A cultural autobiography is a narrative of a person's life with a particular emphasis on the cultural aspects that have influenced the person. There are many definitions for culture but the one I prefer refers to culture as a blueprint for life. It encompasses everything that goes on around an individual so that the person can build his or her "home". Normally, many of us don't stop to think about how our culture has influenced how we greet people, what we eat for breakfast, where and how we go to the bathroom, what we consider beautiful, etc. These daily activities and thoughts are to us as water is to a fish; we don't miss our culture or realize how it impacts us on a day-to-day basis until we are taken out of it.

**Amorim Neto:** When did you start working on it with your students?

**John Knight:** About fifteen years ago or more I began using cultural autobiographies as a part of the American Culture and Civilization class I teach international students.

**Amorim Neto:** What motivated you to adopt this practice? Which authors offer you theoretical support?

**John Knight:** Students' stories have always played a central role in my teaching, even for classes of students learning basic English. I usually had them write some kind of narrative about themselves or something they have seen or heard about. Later on, I began asking them to write about stories their parents, grandparents or other relatives had told them. In the beginning this was a simple exercise of reporting what they had heard; the challenging part was to do it in English, a foreign language to my students. Next I moved on to having them analyze the stories in various ways: why did they remember this particular story; what emotions/memories did the story evoke; did they think that the story had a message to impart; and finally since they had been in the U.S. for a while, did they think the story had any special significance to them as far as their culture was concerned?

A dozen years ago or so, I read "A Different Mirror" by Ronald Takaki. The main thrust of the book details the ways in which different cultural groups have come to America/the US and worked together to build this nation. I think it was one of the first books to emphasize how the different ethnic and cultural groups in America were connected instead of dealing with just one group's history and contributions. In his opening chapter Takaki writes about how our stories are important no matter how mundane they may seem to us. And through the exchange of our stories we come to know one another as human beings mapping out our blueprints for life. So Takaki was instrumental in my adopting the practice of assigning the task of telling and writing stories.

Adrienne Rich, an American poet, also influenced me. In fact, her poem "Prospective Immigrant, Please Note" is part of the first assignment I give my students in the American Culture class. In this short but powerful poem Rich challenges us to think about the experience of going through "a door" and into a new world. She leaves it up to the reader to decide whether the process of entering a new culture or remaining in one's home culture is the "right" choice. It's a difficult puzzle since remaining or leaving have positive and negative attributes.

These examples don't really point to a theory of how cultural autobiographies can help one reach a certain outcome or goal. For me they show how important culture is to each of us and how imperative it is for us to "tell" each other our stories. We need, in this often contentious world of ours, to realize that all of us get up in the morning, dress, eat, take care of personal matters, go to work or school, interact with others, love, hate, come home, interact with our families, eat again and retire for the night. The differences we need to become aware of are outlined in our cultural "blueprints" that help dictate how we build our homes to provide the shelter we all need.

**Amorim Neto:** What are the relations between Cultural Autobiography and the study of the American culture?

**John Knight:** Part of the reason I want students to look at how their own cultures have influenced them is because they are starting off their college experience in a culture "foreign" to them. They run

into situations which anger, amuse, confuse and perplex them since they are usually not aware that a “blueprint” other than their own is at work. Equally disconcerting is the fact that their behavior often presents challenges for their American roommates, classmates and teachers. If they can become aware of how their culture influences the way they interact with the world, then they can make more sense of their experience at St. Mary’s.

**Amorim Neto:** How does the autobiographical writing occur?

**John Knight:** I give the students the assignment about half way through the semester, so they have been in class for six or seven weeks. Prior to that I have the students do some brainstorming activities. For example, I ask them to complete the following phrases in as many ways as they can: I am a (an) \_\_\_\_; I believe \_\_\_\_; I value \_\_\_\_; A \_\_\_\_ (their own culture) is \_\_\_\_\_. Then I have them try to remember stories they’ve heard from their relatives. Finally, before they start writing their first draft, they develop a thesis or main idea and outline how they would support it. I also have them refer to some of the reading we have done, such as the chapter from Takaki’s “A Different Mirror” and a short cultural autobiography entitled “American Chica” which shows them the experience of a South American girl’s coming to the United States.

**Amorim Neto:** What is your role in the process of the autobiographical writing?

**John Knight:** In addition to providing the framework, I have the students peer edit their first drafts in small groups in class. After they have feedback from their classmates, I read the first drafts and meet with students individually to review how the draft can be improved. Usually they need more examples to illustrate the points they are trying to make. I often read parts of their drafts in class to help other students. These may include an engaging introduction that catches the reader’s attention, or an especially vivid story which illustrates a major point. Sometimes I read an entire autobiography that a past student wrote, so they can get more ideas. I’ve found over the years that models are helpful for students to have.

**Amorim Neto:** Every term you have taught young students of different parts of the world. Do you distinguish any difference between Asian, European, African and American students about the culture’s influence in the process of one’s perception and development of the self?

**John Knight:** I think on the whole, and this may just be a stereotypical view, most of the Asian students I have taught have more difficulty participating orally in class. When I talk to them individually, they often tell me they are afraid of making mistakes in speaking English or in having a wrong answer. But I have encountered American students and students from countries where English is the first language who also have trouble taking part in class discussions. Many of the African students I’ve taught have been older students sent by their employers to get further education, so I’m not sure if there are cultural factors working on their ability to participate easily in class or if it’s due to the fact they have more life experience than the usual first year student. So there are differences which seem to be related to culture, but there are personal differences which also influence how they see themselves.

**Amorim Neto:** Do you notice any common symbols or categories among your students' autobiographies?

**John Knight:** The two common elements that come to mind most readily are the importance of family on their lives and the effect that living and studying in the U.S. is having on them. One young Vietnamese woman who had come to the States for two years of high school before entering Saint Mary's College wrote about going home for vacation and having her friends and family telling her she was becoming too "Americanized" because she was dressing inappropriately and using make-up. Most autobiographies tell about the effect that both mothers and fathers have on the students, and in some cases the grandparents also play a central role in the students' lives. Whether the father or the mother plays a more central role in the student's life seems to be more of an individual matter rather than a cultural one.

**Amorim Neto:** Considering your Vietnamese student's example, is the abandonment of our original culture a necessary element of the cross-cultural experience? Have you noticed any identity reinvention in your students or in your proximity to other cultures?

**John Knight:** I don't think it's necessary to abandon our original culture as we learn to live in a different one. What happens is, we adopt new ways to interact with people. After all, most of us probably want to fit into a different situation as comfortably as possible. Your question also reminds me of two stories. Many years ago a student of mine from Hong Kong told me how he had been sternly reminded to take only one napkin and one condiment package at a fast food restaurant in Hong Kong. He had gotten used to taking as many as he wanted when he was in California. The second example is personal. While living in Ethiopia I became fairly fluent both culturally and linguistically. Yet there were occasions when people did not know how to respond to me. My guess was that they did not expect a young white man to act as I did. Even though we adapt to the culture we are living in, I believe we still retain the main qualities of our original culture. Perhaps the more time we live in another culture, the more accustomed to it we become if we don't isolate ourselves from the mainstream of the new culture.

**Amorim Neto:** As a teacher, what do you learn from having students write the Cultural Autobiographies?

**John Knight:** Although this may sound trite, the autobiographies remind me of how precious human beings are and how special these young people are. I have the privilege of looking into their lives and learning about what, in some sense, makes them tick. This past semester, Spring 2009, one of my students, a young Japanese woman studying at St. Mary's as an exchange student for one year, wrote a different kind of autobiography. She took one incident from her life and showed how it had impacted her thinking. When she was about twelve years old, her school took her class on a fieldtrip to Hiroshima, one of the cities where the Americans dropped an atomic bomb during World War Two. Before the trip the students had researched the lives of some of the victims of the bombing. My student realized that she was the same age as one of the girls who had been affected by the radiation and died. This school trip and the research my student did had such an impact on her that she believes that war solves no problems and we should all be working for peace. She's concerned about the fact that Japan relies

on the U.S. for many things and that the government of Japan may be rethinking its neutrality policy in light of the recent missile launchings from North Korea. The passion in her writing was inspiring.

**Amorim Neto:** What has changed in the relationship with your students after the writing of the Cultural Autobiographies?

**John Knight:** They become three dimensional human beings who are more engaging. And even though I may not have these particular students in another class, their autobiographies help remind me of the treasures that lie buried beneath the surface of our skins. Then Takaki's reminder that all of our stories are valuable and important becomes more immediate. In this way my students become members of the large family that has resulted from more than forty years in the classroom.

**Amorim Neto:** Can an educational practice based on the autobiographical writing be helpful in the comprehension of the relationship between teacher and students?

**John Knight:** I definitely think so. The students in the classes where I use the cultural autobiography become more than just a name, or the person who always sits near the door, or the student I can count on to have the reading completed so she can participate in the discussion. Even though I learn as much as possible about the students I teach, the autobiography gives me a window into their lives that most teachers probably don't get. Since I am also the academic advisor for many of the students who write the autobiography, I have more information with which to engage the students when they come to my office for personal as well as academic help. Their stories also allow me to look into their worlds which, because I'm more than forty years older than most of my students, are usually quite different from mine. Yet I am able to see the similarities with my own youth. Additionally, these autobiographies allow me to travel to places I've never been and I can ask my "guides" for more explanation along the way, so my life is enriched. Edward T. Hall, an anthropologist, was one of my first guides when I went into the Peace Corps during the 60's. In our training before we left for Ethiopia, we had to read his "Silent Language." I found it so fascinating that I have read most of his other books and used them in some of my classes. In his "Dance of Life" he writes that a teacher can never be truly effective until he loves his students. The autobiographies my students write help me love my students more.

**Amorim Neto:** You lived in other countries where you also taught classes. What is the impact of these experiences on your teaching?

**John Knight:** From teaching ninety third graders English in one classroom in Ethiopia to instructing classes of fifteen Air Force Warrant Officers in Saudi Arabia, I've learned that if we, both the students and I, make the lessons interesting and fun, we all get more out of the class. So there must be some measure of collaboration between students and teacher.

But perhaps the most important aspect of teaching is the fact that I continue to learn from each group. I remember the day in Ethiopia that I discovered the priest who taught religion was teaching my eighth graders that the world was flat. In geography class I was trying to prepare them for a leaving exam so they could go on to high school. Of course on the exam the world was round. At twenty-one I

had never doubted the earth was round, and I had never had to “prove” it to a group of students. Even though my mother had sent me pictures of the photos the astronauts had taken of the earth, they were of little help. My students simply asked how I knew the photos were real. In the end, we all agreed that on the religion part of the exam the world would be flat but on the geography part it was round. Even today my interactions with students remind me of the value of being humble.

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